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Routes of Modernity and Formulas of Civil Society in India – Introduction

Martin Fuchs

Engaging with India as a social scientist is highly relevant on its own, be it the interest the Indian subcontinent evokes in historical respects or India's role in the modern globalizing world, be it India's contribution to world culture or India's burning social issues. But for a western sociological audience engaging with India is of relevance in other ways too. Engaging with India does in exemplary ways raise the question of sociology's positionality, of the relationship sociology, as a western-centred enterprise, is entertaining with societies considered »other« – non-western, non-modern, respectively modernizing, or peripheral. While sociological theories tend to spawn universalistic concepts and models, or at least concepts supposed to be applicable in general, these usually are being formulated on the basis of the limited experiences of a limited number of societies, especially those lumped together as »the West«. This seems even more incomprehensible when one takes into account that many theories see the development of modern western societies as exceptional case different from developments in the »rest« of societies (most clearly voiced, of course, in the Weberian line of thinking). Reference to other societies in sociological discourse is often just to provide a contrast to western developments. Claims for universality or generality of social theory could thus be based only on the assumption that the specific developments and features of the modern west exhibit what is supposed to be the future of all societies. This of course includes the additional assumption that the other societies will – or have to – follow suit and follow the track laid out for all.

Obviously this is not what we can observe today. First in critical postcolonial reflections, but in the meantime also in mainstream social theory (perhaps as yet still more in English language sociology than in German language contexts) one has started to acknowledge that modernity comes in variations and via diverse trajectories. The challenge of this insight has been taken up in some quarters, but finds itself immediately confronted with new questions. Do we think in terms of varieties of *one* modernity or does the use of the notion of plural »modernities« actually mean that one has to consider basic alternatives? Are the variations of modernity/modernities that are being made out seen grounded in cultural or civilizational differences, resulting in different trajectories »through« modernity, or have they rather to be

conceived as result of an unbalanced, asymmetrical global order which allocates each society or world region a place and role of hegemony or subalternity respectively?

One may rightly argue that the histories of (ex-)colonial or otherwise dependant societies (which for a time had been clubbed together as »Third World«) and the development of western societies, for a certain period directly or indirectly implicated in colonizing enterprises, have to be understood as reciprocally entangled (Randeria). One would, however, have to make sure that discussion of such entanglement is not confined to the sphere of political economy (dependency, imperialism, etc.) but also takes up the dimension of »intercultural« interaction (confrontation, appropriation, negotiation across alleged cultural boundaries). This would also require taking on board some of the conceptual reflections currently undertaken in cultural anthropology: To which extent does it still seem adequate to think in terms of separate societies or cultures, of societies/cultures as (circumscribed) entities, and of the world as a mosaic of cultures or societies?

This leads to further questions: Can we still legitimately base transcultural, globally oriented social scientific research on a binarism of modern and traditional? The distinction between modernizing societies and those apparently stuck in »tradition«, or between »western« and »non-western«, capitalist and »non-capitalist« societies has been constitutive of the whole modernist movement. »Tradition« is a discursive product of the notion of »modernity«. Does this not make comparative approaches built on this dichotomy look like circular arguments? The effect often seen is to compromise and even abort comparison before it has really taken off. What we (as outsiders) see as survival of the past often turns out to be a readapted but well functioning aspect of the modern, shaping and articulating the modern. The modern, in whatever way we conceive it, has to be seen as *transformation* of traditions. This holds even when we grant a specific, engrained rationale to modernity – recognizing society's faculty of self-creation and self-institution, constant reflexivity, and the conflicting trends of rationalization and subjectivation. While all things social seem drawn into the maelstrom of reflection, and what seemed solid is seen melting into air, a closer look shows that many social actors clearly choose to look for new articulations of their traditions, including in many cases communal modes of sociality.¹ The question therefore would be, if we can actually still afford thinking in dichotomous terms, one excluding the other. The construct of the pre-modern or traditional as the static, particularistic, heteronomous, non-reflexive, less rational, or

1 Processes of reflecting and re-articulating tradition as part of new processes of self-institution of society get complicated – for social actors and for social theorists – by the fact that frequently social actors themselves have started employing the tradition-modernity dichotomy in their discourses, as they have also taken up the notion of »culture« as discrete, integrated entity, acquired from an earlier anthropology, and often try to reestablish their life-worlds in those terms.

what else one can think of, has, in this generality, never really been an adequate description of the societies to which it was meant to refer. Obviously such a notion of tradition has to be distinguished from an understanding of tradition as genealogy or line of succession of things, ideas or practices.

And above all else, acknowledging the variance or variety of modernities, or within modernity, implies that we have to rethink the role of theory and the relationship between theory and historical-empirical research. Macro-sociology especially has for a long time tended to think in terms of models. The risk of this lies in what could be termed misplaced concreteness, taking models as the really real, and this danger looms particularly large in theories of modernization, which assume developmental stages societies are to go through. Models, in principle, are supposed to be abstractions of trends inherent in social reality, meant to better spell out the implications of social processes. What a view on the range of modern global developments however clearly exposes is that most models of modernity and modernization embrace far too small a number of factors. They have been particularly poor in taking into account the various dynamics of interaction across different cultural and social contexts as well as between institutional and collective actors linked by deeply asymmetrical relationships, which have resulted in very diverse constellations. Modernity requires much more open models, if models at all. We might perhaps better do if we think in terms of basic *problématiques* of modernity, in the sense suggested by Peter Wagner (2001) and partly reflected in the works of Alain Touraine, Johann Arnason or Shmuel Eisenstadt. Even when still paying preferential attention to western experiences, these approaches, irrespective of their specific objectives, at least try to face the diversity and openness of the current social predicament.

It obviously is inadequate to subsume all social forms that do not satisfy predetermined definitions of modernity under *one* idea of »tradition«. This makes both modernity and tradition into one-dimensional concepts, and skirts the task of actual sociological analysis. Disregard for the actual modes of operation of other societies makes it impossible to grasp the various modalities of modern society, as also to evaluate the impact of the (colonial) confrontation and engagement with western social and political modes.² We have to be more specific. Many of our terms – like community, like civil society – are just too general and vague and thus hide, instead of bringing out, the differences between various modes of sociality.

The discovery that modernization processes did not develop in accordance with theoretical blueprints and that modernity shows a wide range of forms, some disarticulated and leading to increasing poverty and dependence, others seemingly suc-

² Certain forms of postcolonial critique of western modes of domination and representation repeat such one-dimensional generalization in reverse.

cessful according to commonly acknowledged benchmarks, forces sociology to become much more history- and context-conscious again. We need a new effort of comparison, but of comparison of a more reflexive kind: The idea can no longer be to subsume the local (the »particular«, the »culture-specific«) under predefined general notions and models. The idea has to be to try to understand the *various* options developed under varying historical constellations – the different modulations of central modern problematiques – as also the articulations of certain modes of life with other modes – the refractions of perspectives and the infractions inflicted. To say it succinctly with *Rajeev Bhargava's* words: the guiding idea has to be to make an effort of not identifying concepts with their western variants. Comparison, even if it starts with pre-conceived questions, as it inevitably has to, has to rethink these questions *during* engagement with the other social constellations, as it then, under the new premises, also has to reflect again on the stories and grand narratives we happen to tell ourselves (and others) about the careers of western societies.

This new approach of historical social comparison must include an aspect usually overlooked: comparison has to be pursued on the macro- and the micro-levels simultaneously, and in constant intercommunication. To understand, for example, the workings of community forms of sociality in different social contexts does require attending to the perspectives of the different individual, collective and institutional actors involved, as also to the changes of modes of operation of communal institutions (and not just their alleged disappearance or affirmation). Meanings of concepts are not fully spelled out when originally formulated but develop and come to the fore in the diverse, contextual articulations of concepts with other concepts and with social practices. In many cases, conceptual debates in the west on western experiences would gain would one also see the light thrown from experiences in other regions on the concepts and problems originating from the west.

Sociology in the west has to get thoroughly engaged with debates in the different non-western regions and societies and in post-colonial discourses. Sociology also has to gain a more decentred or multi-centred understanding of globalization. Sociology can only think to achieve these tasks if it closely cooperates with comparative global as well as regional history, with the region-specific or »area«-related cultural studies (Indology, Islamic, Chinese, Japanese, African and other civilizational and area studies), and particularly with cultural and social anthropology (fields which themselves are already engaged in discussions on alternative or multiple forms of modernity).

This panel combines reference to two debates, the one on the multiplicity of modernity, the other on the fate and the modalities of civil society. The idea of »multiple modernities«, as met with in sociology, is usually identified with the name of Shmuel Eisenstadt and builds on his and some other sociologists' rereading of Max Weber's comparative studies of world religions and major civilizations over the

last two decades. The idea of variations of modernity, however, has other sources too. In several non-western and especially ex-colonial countries, and with special intensity in India, one can observe an intellectual engagement with western modernity and efforts of negotiating new social and political equations under one's own cultural and political premises from the 19th century onwards. Questions raised cover economic as well as ethical and religious dimensions, the relationships between society and (colonial) state as well as directions of social reform, forms of knowledge and science as well as the realm of aesthetics. Recent post-colonial debates renewed the critique of colonialism and modernity, revisited the implications of modernization, the tradition-modernity dichotomy and the representation of the non-west under asymmetrical power relations, and evaluated the options available and the policies that were and are being pursued. Some scholars (like Ashis Nandy), following lines set earlier by some of the public and spiritual leaders (esp. M. K. Gandhi), even ponder the possibility of pitting a universal derived from their own cultural or civilizational background against the modern universal.³ Burning issues include: How has the western modern been experienced and appropriated? What dimensions of one's own tradition seem still accessible as well as relevant for today's life? How to relate to broken traditions and how to organize collective memory? And, of no small importance, how and under which premises to reorganize society as well as the political system in a way which respects the diversity and the agency of the members of the wide variety of cultures, life-worlds and religions which make up India, but reduces inequality and hierarchy?

These questions illustrate that the idea of civil society is not being taken for granted in Indian debates. Indian scholars and intellectuals have in various ways engaged with western concepts of civil society and its relation with the state. They also are well aware of the wide and undecided meaning of the term within western discourse. Civil society is not a concept that, even if one would want, could be taken over lock, stock and barrel. Rather, the notion of civil society is seen to provide a frame of reference – embedded in modern problematiques in the sense referred to above – under which to discuss political processes, the changing forms of Indian democracy, the equations between citizenship and a pastoral and controlling attitude of state agencies towards the population, the relations between social elite and lower class majority, between modern associationism, communal forms of sociality and social movements, as well as possibilities of self-development. Given the range and complexity of the questions before us the panel can only serve as introduction to an area of reflection little known among social scientists here, and highlight some of the concerns of Indian debates.

³ Formally similar modes of pitting one's own universal against the western-colonial can be found e.g. with Swami Vivekananda.

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